

# *the question in the crib*

a sermon preached on the feast of

## *the incarnation of Christ*

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at

### *st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews:1:1-4; John 1:1-14

When you gazed at the Christmas Crib, what did you see? What do you think is 'the message' of the Crib?

At this time of the year there are many claims as to what constitutes 'the Christmas message'. The standard ones are easy to rehearse: God is love; God is *self-emptying* love; Jesus brings peace; God has come to rescue us from our sins; Jesus wants us to love each other; Or, in certain circles, God loves babies and the 'nuclear family' more than single people and queers.

What is often called 'the Christmas message' is typically packaged up as a kind of 'answer' to a problem. For instance, because humans are not loving enough, God sends Jesus to make us love more. Or, because we're always at war with each other – because we're capable of such violence – God sends baby Jesus as the solution to 'world peace'. (To believe this, one needs to be completely ignorant of church history, and especially of the church's own violence!) Or, humans are just so damned despicably and 'originally sinful', God sent baby Jesus to grow into the man Jesus, so that he could be punished with brutal execution instead of us! That last 'answer' is very popular in some church circles.

It is thus understandable that most of us think that providing an 'answer' to a 'problem' is the task of Christian faith; since that's probably what we learned at Sunday School. Typically, *we* are the 'problem'; God provides the 'solution' in baby Jesus. The contents of the Crib, then, is somehow meant to be the 'answer'. Baby Jesus is a kind of beachhead landing for a rescue-religion mission.

Now I wonder... when you take a step back and reflect, even just for a moment, what do you make of these 'messages', these 'answers'? What do you think of this claim that the birth of baby Jesus is the 'answer' to a human problem? Is Christmas an 'answer'?

"What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?"<sup>1</sup> This was the question we heard Jesus pose on the third Advent Sunday. Jesus – at least, the Jesus of the gospels rather than the Jesus of much religion – is very fond of asking questions. Indeed, his questioning is legendary; on so many occasions he asks pointed questions of people, rather than supplying comforting ready-made answers, forcing people to think for themselves and come to their own answers.<sup>2</sup> "What do you think?"<sup>3</sup>

And many of his questions would fail the Anglican politeness test; and thus his own people would not accept him.<sup>4</sup> When asked by the religious police to give an account of his authority, he turns the questions on them.<sup>5</sup> When he is told that his mother and family are outside wanting to see him, his response is the rude question: "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?"<sup>6</sup> Even when on trial Jesus' refusal to answer Pilate's question is itself a form of question.<sup>7</sup> In John's account of this episode 'the light of the world who shines in the darkness'<sup>8</sup> throws back the extraordinary challenge: "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?"<sup>9</sup> When Jesus is gathering a band of followers, this "reflection of God's glory and exact imprint of God's very being"<sup>10</sup> greets would-be disciples with no hail-fellow

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1 Matthew 11:7

2 e.g. Luke 7:42, 10:36, 15:4, 10:15, Matthew 18:12, 21:16, 21:28, 22:42

3 Matthew 18:12

4 John 1:11

5 Matthew 21:24-25, Matthew 22:18,21, 22:42, 23:34

6 Matthew 12:48, Mark 3:33

7 Matthew 27:11, Mark 15:2, Luke 23:3, John 18:34

8 John 1:5

9 John 18:34

10 Hebrews 1:3

well-met, welcome-to-the-club pseudo-intimacy. Instead a blunt question to them: “What are you looking for?”<sup>11</sup>

This is because Jesus is a teacher in the wisdom tradition; and wisdom teachers down the ages have always asked would-be followers, ‘What do you want? What are you looking for?’ What is your deepest desire?

Now, I mention all this so that we might gaze into the Christmas Crib with gospel eyes – rather than with the rose-tinted glasses that were possibly put on us at Sunday School, and probably reinforced by the carols which have massaged our December spending. And when we do, we no longer see Christmas as a celebration of a baby. Moreover, with gospel eyes we find not simplistic ‘answers’ – nor marketable ‘solutions’ – but profound questioning.

You see, that’s what the Christmas Crib is, a blunt question to us: ‘What are we looking for?’ ‘What did we come out to see?’ ‘What is our deepest desire?’ Was it just the candles or the flowers or the lovely music, the gorgeous costumes, the handsome building? Was it just to experience the warmth of each other’s company, or of family Christmases past? Don’t get me wrong; these are lovely things, and we are very fortunate to be able to enjoy them – and with recent days’ news our gratitude is only deepened. But is this really what we came out to see? Is this really the message of the Christmas Crib?

The human ‘face’ in the Crib is a blunt question. This is the Word-become-flesh<sup>12</sup> face who asks us – just as the eternal Word has been asking since the beginning<sup>13</sup> and down the centuries – “And you, who do you say that I am?”<sup>14</sup>

Who do we say that he is? Who are *we*? Do we truly desire to ‘receive him and become children of God’?<sup>15</sup> ‘What *did* we come out to see?’

For the Crib does not supply ready-made ‘answers’. Answers are designed to shut things down. When religion poses as an answer – as it so often does – it attempts to set ‘the Word made flesh’ in concrete. And in all our hand-wringing about the ‘demise’ of the church, we would do well to consider this as one of the major contributing factors.

Unlike answers, “questions attract and hold our attention. They are irresistible, like a half-open door.”<sup>16</sup> Questions open up space; in mind and in heart. So let Jesus be our guide: “Rather than giving answers and making rules [he] called people to experiential knowledge”.<sup>17</sup>

The Christmas Crib questions us about our experiential knowledge. Indeed, the Incarnation is a series of inter-related questions: What did I come out to see? Who do I say that Jesus is? Who am I? What is the space that the Christ child opens up in the world? And in me? What is the relationship between me and the Christ, and the Creator, and “all the ends of the earth”,<sup>18</sup> and the entire creation, What am I looking for? What is my deepest desire?

In the Christmas Crib, what is the Creator desiring to *incarnate* – to put into flesh, to embody – in me, in you?

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<sup>11</sup> John 1:38

<sup>12</sup> John 1:14

<sup>13</sup> John 1:1-3

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 16:15

<sup>15</sup> John 1:12-13

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence Freeman, **Jesus: The Teacher Within**, Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 2010, p26.

<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Freeman, p26.

<sup>18</sup> Isaiah 52:10